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**February 13, 2004**

Editorial

## **Zero tolerance for sex crimes in military**

The wheels of justice turn slowly in the U.S. military, but they did receive a boost recently, thanks in part to a series of investigative articles in The Denver Post. It reported increasing accounts of rape from women who served in Iraq and inadequacies in the military justice system.

About 20 members of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, including Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., reacted quickly and spurred Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to begin an investigation. But the investigation is a token effort and will not effect significant change without a deeper institutional commitment and a clear policy of zero tolerance.

Sexual violence against women in the military is unacceptable, but that message has yet to be sent or enforced by the military. Many women do not report assault or seek necessary mental health support because under the military system they are not guaranteed privacy — any report can and, in some cases, must be filed with commanding officers.

A rape victim can be disciplined for having sexual relations or for adultery. These protocols are unjust, absurd and inadequate to women's rights and needs. The protocols perpetuate the systematic degradation of servicewomen and impede progress toward an equal and accountable military culture.

In an interview with The Minnesota Daily editorial board, McCollum expressed her dissatisfaction with Rumsfeld's response. "Shame on the Pentagon," she said. The investigation focuses primarily on issues related to reporting assault in combat theaters and not the factors contributing to its prevalence or the internal prosecution of offenses.

McCollum said "(Rumsfeld's) whole letter disappointed me. He should not be asking for 90 days to find out how they handle their reports."

She also said, "Prior to the investigation Mr. Rumsfeld and the president need to say there is zero tolerance, to let victims know they will be treated with respect and dignity when they come forward."

The Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues should be applauded for their efforts. Unfortunately, violence against women in the military is an issue that cycles in and out of the public eye only when the media reports a new and particularly offensive case. Servicewomen need a more consistent voice for change in the system. McCollum must continue to take the lead.

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